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My Mysterious Neighbour

by Garf Collins

I left the National Theatre deep in thought. The play, titled *Another World*, had dealt with the topic of jihad, with particular emphasis on ISIS in Syria and the impact on attitudes to Muslims in the West. The stories of the women who told of their loss of sons who had disappeared to Syria were harrowing. It made me think that your family is never in the past. You carry it with you everywhere. Alongside this was the message that we in the West added to the feelings of alienation among some young Muslims with the standard assumption that *Muslim = likely terrorist*.

As I had to go down to Bristol that evening, I took the Tube to Paddington. Sitting on the train, I unfortunately dwelt on the Underground bombings of 2005. The victims then had presumably had no fear of young men with beards and rucksacks. They had been accepted as normal travellers, but they had an extreme loathing of our society and wrought a terrible revenge. Such atrocities naturally made us wary. Unfortunately, most terrorists are Muslim. Shouldn't mainstream Muslims distance themselves from the extremists more vocally?

Once on the concourse at Paddington, I turned my attention to getting a coffee and finding a seat where I could read the evening paper in view of the train departure display. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure dressed in black sit down next to me. She answered an exotic ringtone and, although the language was unfamiliar, it was clear she was having a tense conversation with someone at the other end.

This caused me to look at her properly for the first time. She was little more than a girl, slight and modestly dressed, including a hijab. Her body language displayed extreme stress. As she talked, she gripped the straps of her backpack tightly and seemed to gesture toward it as she spoke.

My examination was interrupted by two heavily tattooed young men who had obviously been in the station bar far too long. They staggered past and, catching sight of my neighbour, one said, "Bleeding Muslim. Why don't you go back to your own fucking country?"

"Yeah. Take that fucking rag off your head, you Arab bitch," added his companion.

She abruptly closed her phone and tried not to take any notice of them, but I could see she was now even more upset.

"Don't pay any attention to them," I ventured, "they are just ignorant drunkards."

She managed only a strangled sound, which might have been thanks, but equally could have been a curse in another language.

My mind went straight back to the play. Wasn't this the message it had conveyed? It was yobbos like those men who made the situation much worse and caused young Muslims to be alienated from general society. Then I felt a touch on my sleeve.

In broken English, my mysterious neighbour said, "Please look after bag. I go to toilet."